

[OIT Home](#) [Computing](#) [Telephones](#) [Policies](#) [Help](#)

UMass Office of Information Technologies

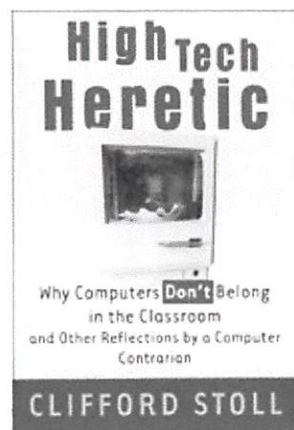
 Search OIT[OIT](#) > [@oit](#) > [spring 00 issue](#)

Book Review: *High Tech Heretic*

By Jason Proctor
Help Desk Services
jproctor@oit.umass.edu

Title: *High Tech Heretic*
Author: Clifford Stoll
Publisher: Doubleday, 1999 (ISBN 0-385-48975-7)

Summary: The book raises important philosophical questions about computers in elementary and secondary education, but it does so more like an emotional rant than an analytic essay.



I enjoyed Stoll's earlier book, *Silicon Snake Oil* (Doubleday, 1995), several years ago, so I came to *High Tech Heretic* with high expectations. Technology has long been hailed as a solution to the problems of education—from year to year, students constantly need more knowledge and more skills, and teachers have less time and fewer resources. I hoped this book, subtitled "Why Computers don't Belong in the Classroom," would address some of the difficulties of improving the learning environment and offer some insight into how educators can better harness new technology. Instead, most of the book is a disjointed collection of quotes and anecdotes peppered with the sometimes-wry reactions of a self-proclaimed "computer contrarian." The author expresses concern that computers are doing more harm than good in the classroom. He says they are a distraction, an interruption, and a drain on precious resources. One rural school district bragged about allocating money to a 56k Internet connection instead of filling a vacant teacher position. Even though he cites similar situations in a handful of other districts, Stoll never convinces me that the problem is pandemic throughout hundreds of

thousands of schools around the country, or that this is more than a symptom of a larger problem that he never really identifies by name.

Specifically, he doesn't like many of the changes in education that have happened over the last few decades. Teaching towards standardized tests discourages deeper critical thinking and analysis. Allowing calculators to replace basic arithmetic

Please note: This is an archived copy of a printed publication, provided for reference and context only. In the case of some articles, information and links (especially to non-UMass Web sites) may be out of date. OIT does not actively maintain these pages.

destroys the foundations necessary to do things like tipping a waitress or making change. Learning, he argues, isn't supposed to be fun—it's supposed to be hard work, and the knowledge and understanding that result are the rewards. He stopped just short of "When I was a kid, we had to walk 10 miles to school ..."

Much of the second half of the book is not linked directly to education; it's a series of short, independent essays, presented as chapters, describing a few of the other symptoms of a society that's too inured to technology to see its shortcomings, as well as a couple of humorous interludes about unattractive design ("You can have any color you wish, as long as it's off-white putty.") and turning an obsolete computer into a new aquarium or kitty litter box.

Stoll does frequently point out that he's not just any random observer with no knowledge of how education or computers work. He's an astronomy professor at Stanford University, has been programming computers since the mid-1960s, and has been involved in what is now the Internet since the mid-1970s. He's not against computers, he says, just disappointed that they're not fulfilling the promises the salesmen are making. Computers are useful and powerful tools, but they are neither omnipotent nor the only tools humans have to work out our problems. He suggests we examine closely who profits from selling impossible dreams to overworked teachers and administrators. And he wants people to pause and consider what the promoters are saying, and how it relates to reality:

These utopian ideals infect politicians. In 1993, Al Gore said, "In the next decade it will be possible for an elementary school student to come home after class and instead of playing Nintendo, plug into the Library of Congress and explore an entire universe of information."

Yep, kids of 2003 will be able to see the catalog of the Library of Congress. But they won't want to. They'll still play Nintendo, watch TV, and when they're on-line, visit the MTV home page.

He has a point. Just like the telephone, and the radio, and the television, and cable, computers and the Internet are not the cure for the ills of the world. Stoll cares deeply about the topic, but I don't feel he expressed the key points of his argument as rationally or as clearly as he should have, or that he sufficiently distinguished his skepticism from the cynicism he mentioned in the book's introduction. Stoll says he has "a wish to make our technological world better suited for people, rather than people better suited for machines." It's a noble goal, but High Tech Heretic may be too informal and emotional to serve as a solid foundation.

Last revised: Thursday, 21 February, 2002.

Copyright © 2002 University of Massachusetts Amherst.



Report site problems to wwwdev@oit.umass.edu.

This is an [Official](#) Page/Publication of the University of Massachusetts [Amherst Campus](#) Office of Information Technologies.